

2022

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Recommended Citation

Barnicle, Brendan (2022) "Responding to Trauma: A Theology of Healing Ministry," *New Horizons*: Vol. 6: Iss. 2, Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/newhorizons/vol6/iss2/9>

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Responding to Trauma: A Theology of Healing

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Abstract:

A theology of healing ministry is fundamentally relational, and it suggests that humans can honor God and the imago dei by assisting and supporting each other after traumatic experiences. Considering theology through the lens of healing ministry demonstrates the need for recognizing healing as one of the ongoing possibilities and eschatological imaginings of Christ's churches. By embracing a theology of healing ministry, churches can model and foster the healing that is needed by all of creation.

Keywords: trauma, healing, ecclesiology, soteriology, healing ministry

In the spring of 2021, theologian and president of Union Theological Seminary Serene Jones met with a group of Episcopal cathedral deans to discuss the impacts of trauma.¹ Jones is one of the foremost authorities on trauma and theology, and wrote one of the very first books on the topic, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*.² In their meeting, she noted all of the recent traumatic events, and she provided a word of caution. Even as these events fade from the news, the trauma of these events will linger with people, and the impact of trauma will show up in congregations.³ She encouraged her audience to consider how they might prepare for the pastoral challenges of caring for increasing numbers of traumatized people. A theology of

¹ Sam Candler, "Trauma," The Cathedral of St. Philip, May 16 2021. [Trauma \(cathedralatl.org\)](https://www.cathedralatl.org/). Accessed March 28, 2022.

² Serene Jones, *Trauma + Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), xi.

³ Nathan LeRud, "Dean's Forum: Trauma, Grief & Grace, Trinity Cathedral, September 20, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fi-3oSBH_JM. Accessed March 28, 2022.

healing ministry is one way for churches to respond to trauma in their midst. Moreover, looking at theology through the lens of healing ministry can reinforce and even enhance classical understandings of grace, sacramentality, Christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology.

Healing is defined as the process of becoming sound or healthy again. It is distinct from curing. In the New Testament, there are two Greek works that are translated into English as “heal”: *therapeuo* and *iaomai*. *Therapeuo* connotes medical care and the healing by a physician. *Iaomai* connotes the desired result of healing, a cure. While they are generally used interchangeably, *iaomai* generally has a more positive connotation because it reflects a successful outcome from the healing process. A theology of healing ministry is not based on *iaomai*. It is based on *therapeuo*; it argues for a theological basis for assisting in the healing process. It also suggests the theological insights that can be gained from the hermeneutic lens of healing ministry. In this way, a theology of healing ministry builds on the existing theologies of trauma, but offers even greater emphasis on the healing process. A theology of healing ministry also extends beyond providing *therapeuo* to individuals. It includes assisting in the healing of communities, institutions, and all God’s creation. Ultimately, the aim of a theology of healing ministry is the flourishing of all creation through the process of healing.

A theology of healing ministry descends from a theology of God and of salvation that results in the provision of healing for all of God’s creation. It reflects the incarnation and embodiment of sacramental grace. However, it does not suggest that churches or their members will cure all ills. Churches and their members can assist in the healing process. They can journey with traumatized people, and perhaps even offer restorative and supportive services. They can contribute to the flourishing of creation, but they do not cure creation. A theology of healing ministry is fundamentally relational, and it suggests that humans can honor God and the *imago*

dei by assisting and supporting each other after traumatic experiences. Considering theology through the lens of healing ministry demonstrates the need for recognizing healing as one of the ongoing possibilities and eschatological imaginings of Christ's churches. By embracing a theology of healing ministry, churches can model and foster the healing that is needed by all of creation.

Looking at theology through the lens of healing ministry can reinforce and even enhance classical understandings of grace and soteriology. Serene Jones' theology of trauma informs a theology of healing ministry in which God's grace may be the only thing that truly enables traumatized people, traumatized communities and traumatized institutions to break free of their trauma. Looking at soteriology through the lens of healing ministry reinforces the persistence of God's grace. In Jones' work, she points out that traumatized people can be trapped in a psychological cycle. "The psychological material on trauma says that the hardest part of dealing with trauma is figuring out how to interrupt the pattern. Something must happen that breaks the community or the person out of the prison they have been trapped in."⁴ Unfortunately, many traumatized individuals, communities and institutions cannot break the cycle. They are too frightened to let something new into their lives. As a result, they resist the very things that might help to break them free of the trauma.⁵ However, Jones argues that God's grace is the one thing that can help people to break free. God's grace comes from outside of human reach. It is completely free. Jones notes that in Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, a world that is "imprisoned by violence" is "massively interrupted by the gift of God's love."⁶ She points to the

⁴ Jones, xv.

⁵ Jones xv.

⁶ Jones, xvi.

Christ's resurrection as the ultimate example of God's interrupting grace. In the resurrection, God's love "comes into the midst of violence and is not undone by it but creates another story."⁷

Similarly, traumatized people, communities and institutions are frequently "imprisoned by violence," and they need God's grace and love to break them free, so that they can create another story, a new story. In helping people, communities and institutions to overcome trauma, a theology of healing ministry suggests that with God's grace, they can break free of the past traumatic narrative and create another story. Grace viewed through the lens of healing ministry provides a way forward for traumatized people and their communities. For example, in his book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, theologian James Cone describes the horrors and trauma inflicted on black bodies in the United States. Yet, despite the trauma, his family and his community experienced persistent love and vitality. Cone and his community were able to tell a story that overcame the trauma. To Cone and to Jones, that love and vitality is God's grace.⁸ It is God's grace that enables traumatized people to imagine a new story for themselves.⁹ Ultimately, Jones' view of grace is consistent with classical soteriology. It can also be applied more broadly than it has been applied in Jones' work. Jones' work focuses primarily on recovery for individuals but God's grace is also available to communities, institutions and all creation. Humanity may not be able to cure all creation, but with God's grace, humanity can start to journey with all that are in need of healing, including the planet. Too frequently, we underestimate the impact of God's grace. While Christians might acknowledge God's grace, they are reluctant to trust in it. Finding God's grace in the midst of trauma reinforces the persistence

⁷ Jones, xvi.

⁸ Jones, xvii.

⁹ Jones, 22.

and the power of that grace, and the experience can boldly enrich one's spirituality and discipleship.

Frequently, traumatized people lose their sense of their own agency after a traumatic event.¹⁰ Without a sense of agency, people have less control of their lives, and forego some of their own free will.¹¹ A theology of healing ministry observes that God's grace permits humans to exercise their free will and agency, even when they do it in ways that are destructive. Therefore, helping a traumatized person to understand the depth of God's grace helps them to re-develop their agency and ultimately, their resiliency. If they can see that God will love them, regardless of whether they deserve God's love, then they might understand that God will love them, even when they make mistakes. Therefore, God's unconditional love and grace may help them to develop agency.¹² With a sense of agency, traumatized people can begin to recover from the trauma.¹³ Similarly, traumatized communities and institutions can start a recovery process, once they acknowledge the power of God's grace in their midst.

Jones' work focuses on the ways that God's grace can break in to the life of the traumatized person, but a theology of healing ministry recognizes that God's grace also benefits caregivers. In describing the experiences of the chaplains serving at Ground Zero in New York City after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, chaplain Storm Swain explains that the chaplains found that "God was with them and in what they were doing, in the prayers they prayed and the pastoral relationships that developed," when they were journeying with

¹⁰ Jones, 18; Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 56; Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2014), 97-100.

¹¹ Jennifer Baldwin, *Trauma-Sensitive Theology: Thinking Theologically in the Era of Trauma* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 45-46; Herman, 90-91.

¹² Baldwin, 54.

¹³ Jones, 18.

traumatized people.¹⁴ A theology of healing ministry highlights the grace bestowed upon caregivers. Healing ministries demonstrates God's grace in two dramatic ways: God's ability to aid the traumatized person and God's ability to call upon another person to join the traumatized person on their journey toward flourishing.

A theology of healing ministry also illuminates sacramentality. For many people, the routine of the sacraments of Eucharist and baptism can lose their impact and importance. While God's grace is still at work in those sacraments, one might take the grace for granted. Healing ministry provides another way of recognizing God's grace in our midst. In fact, healing ministries could be even more impactful for all involved because of their more limited adoption. If adopted more fully, healing ministry provides another way of facilitating God's grace in the world. Moreover, applying healing ministry to communities, institutions and all of creation demonstrates the depth and breadth of God's grace. In recovery from a traumatic event, God may be made known to us. This is not to say that God wishes traumas for us, but that God can become known to us in any number of situations, even traumatic ones. Therefore, looking at sacraments through the lens of healing ministry reinforces the relentlessness of God's grace, which is available to both traumatized person and caregiver on their journey to wholeness. In this way, healing ministry shares the communal benefits of Eucharist and baptism.

Considering Christology through the lens of healing ministry also highlights the ways that Christ aids human transformation. In the resurrection, Jesus makes things new and creates new possibilities. Among other things, Jesus' ministry was a ministry of curing people. Where a theology of healing ministry focuses on assisting in healing, Jesus did not need human assistance

¹⁴ Storm Swain, *Trauma and Transformation at Ground Zero: A Pastoral Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2011), 24.

to cure people. However, there is at least one example of Jesus engaging in the healing process, where he did not automatically cure someone. When Jesus first appeared to the disciples, he appeared in his broken body of the cross (John 20:19-31 NRSV). He did not necessarily need to appear to the disciples in that form. It is likely that they would have recognized him if he appeared without his wounds. (Matt. 28: 9-10; John 20:16-18 NRS). By appearing with his wounds, Jesus seems to empathize with the wounds of fear and disappointment that mark the disciples after his crucifixion. In that broken body, Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. In seeing Jesus' broken body, the disciples could more easily accept the reality of the crucifixion. They also had the opportunity to participate in the resurrection, and find themselves transformed by it.

Looking at Christology through the lens of healing ministry reinforces that Jesus was someone who understood the brokenness of human flesh. He demonstrates that brokenness is not a liability but an asset. Brokenness leads to transformation for himself and for the disciples. Jesus breathes forth the Holy Spirit from his broken body, not his pre-crucified body. Jesus did not cure the disciples of their psychological and emotional brokenness, but he journeyed with them in it. He met them in their brokenness and he assisted them in living with it and transforming it into something new. Jesus demonstrates the transformative power of God's grace and of the Holy Spirit. A theology of healing ministry challenges us to do the same. Our fleshly brokenness may always remain, and yet, transformation remains a possibility. In that process, our actions affirm a God whose "goal for creation is the ultimate transformation of pain, not its transmission."¹⁵ The transformation of pain is a process. It rarely occurs in a single instance. Instead, it requires the kind of healing process that is reflected in healing ministry.

¹⁵Belden C. Lane, *Ravished by Beauty: The Surprising Legacy of Reformed Spirituality* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 221.

In casting Christ as one who not only cures illness but also assists in the healing process, classical Christology can reinforce the healing hermeneutic. Christ remains the mediator between God and humanity, and Christ also mediates in the midst of fleshly brokenness.¹⁶ Christ also remains the hero, Christus Victor, and Christ's heroism includes the characteristics of fleshly brokenness.¹⁷ Christ remains the "embodiment of fullness," as reflected in Colossians, even in the midst of his own brokenness.¹⁸ Ultimately, brokenness in Christ aligns with the brokenness in humanity, and Christ provides the means of salvation regardless of our human condition. Looking to Christ as healer reinforces liberation theology's view that sees Christ as healing the suffering inflicted upon people by broken economic and political systems. Christ seeks to heal those systems and the traumas that they produce in the same ways that he seeks to reframe individual experiences of trauma.¹⁹

Connecting people despite brokenness also builds community and communion. In the late 20th century, communion ecclesiology won broad adoption among most Christian denominations.²⁰ Despite the strong consensus for communion ecclesiology, it can still create confusion, because it was developed from two different biblical meanings of the word *koinonia*. *Koinonia* can mean "common participation in the gifts of salvation won by Jesus Christ and bestowed by the Holy Spirit" and it can mean "the bond of fellowship of the community of Christians that results from our union with God."²¹ Accordingly, it can suggest both a vertical

¹⁶ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 209. Cites C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Fontana, 1967), 286.

¹⁷ McGrath, 292.

¹⁸ Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *Christology: A Global Introduction*, 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2016), 35-36.

¹⁹ Leonardo Boff & Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*. Trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 62.

²⁰ Scott MacDougall, *More Than Communion: Imagining an Eschatological Ecclesiology* (London: T&T Clark, 2015), 14.

²¹ Patrick Granfield, "The Church Local and Universal: Realization of Communion," *The Jurist* 49 (1989), 451.

communion in grace with God, as in the first definition or a horizontal communion modeled in the three persons of the Trinity, as in the second definition. Understandably, some people have focused on the vertical dimension, which emphasizes grace and sacraments. Others have focused on the horizontal dimension, which focuses on fellowship and support among the members of a church.²² A theology of healing ministry seeks to build on communion ecclesiology by embracing both definitions. A theology of healing ministry highlights the sacramental manifestation of grace present in healing ministries. In addition, a theology of healing ministry focuses on the fellowship and support; it builds upon relationality. A theology of healing ministry actively embraces the work of building connective tissue within all of God's creation. It seeks to address all brokenness, including the brokenness of the planet. As the planet's environment systems breakdown because of human impact, a theology of healing ministry seeks to prioritize transformation and healing of all of creation. Healing ministry is the antidote to the isolation and separation that so frequently accompany trauma.²³ A theology of healing ministry elaborates on communion ecclesiology, by suggesting that the healing process can help to bring people and all of creation together, so that creation can more fully resemble the Body of Christ.

The therapeutic treatments for traumatized people focus heavily on social reconnection and developing a sense of mission.²⁴ Churches can provide opportunities for both. The social reconnection in churches can also be progressive. Initially, the social interaction may be limited to worship or a class, but over time, those interactions might mature into genuine partnerships in which people can share and reframe their traumatic experiences. As trust grows, traumatized individuals might trust both their new friends and God more fully. Christ's ministry and the

²² Susan K. Wood, "The Church as Communion," in *The Gift of the Church: A Textbook of Ecclesiology*, ed. Peter Phan (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 160.

²³ Herman, 121.

²⁴ Herman, 205-211.

Christian tradition articulate a strong mission. As theologian Kathryn Tanner notes in her description of theological anthropology, “the Father sends the Son on a mission, which involves his incarnation and earthly mission for our good, a mission that culminates with the Son’s sending the Spirit to us.”²⁵ Subsequently, “when we receive the Spirit, we therefore receive Christ to be the new shape of our lives, dying to ourselves and rising with him as participants in the Father’s mission of love for the world.”²⁶ A theology of healing ministry embraces such a sense of mission, and views it as critical to recovery and flourishing. It also provides us with a way to live into our mission of love for the world. Healing ministry offers the opportunity to put that faith into action, enabling the Holy Spirit to guide us.

Any meaningful change to ecclesiology needs to be informed by the underlying eschatology.²⁷ Any eschatology is going to be highly speculative because there is so little hard data to define the eschaton. Therefore, any understanding of the eschaton will require imagination. Theologian Trevor Hart posits four crucial functions for developing eschatological imagination: making the absent present; discerning meaning of things; envisioning new life; and activating hope.²⁸ Interestingly, these are also characteristics of healing from trauma. They are applicable to individual, community, institutional and planetary healing. A theology of healing ministry seeks to integrate a view of eschatology with the tools for the healing process.

Like a person envisioning the eschaton, the traumatized person is trying to make the absent present. Realized eschatology attempts to make the future present. While eschatologists

²⁵ Kathryn Tanner, “Theological Anthropology,” in *The Vocation of Anglican Theology*, ed. Ralph McMichael (London: CMS Press, 2014), 122.

²⁶ Tanner, 124.

²⁷ MacDougall, 5-5.

²⁸ MacDougall, 144-146; Citing Trevor Hart, “Imagination for the Kingdom of God? Hope, Promise, and the Transformative Power of an Imagine Future,” in Richard Bauckham (ed.), *God Will Be All in All: The Eschatology of Jurgen Moltmann* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 54, 75, 76.

debate the value of a realized eschatology, it has little value for traumatized people. For many traumatized people, the future is frightening and far from present to them. Rather than making the future present, trauma makes the past present. Traumatized people have difficulty planning for the future. Initially, traumatized people try to undo the past and make sense of the trauma. Frequently, when they cannot make the present absent, they make themselves absent. As a result, many traumatized people will forgo their agency, their speech, even their own feelings in response to trauma.²⁹ Consequently, it can be very difficult for traumatized people to think about the future.³⁰ Yet, traumatized people need to think about the future. A theology of healing ministry encourages traumatized people to re-engage with thoughts about the future, just like eschatology. Eschatology invites imagination. As churches imagine the eschaton, they model a behavior that traumatized people, communities and institutions can follow to enhance their own imaginations.

In recovering from trauma, people try to make sense of the traumatic event. They seek to find the meaning of things. In fact, the primary focus of post-traumatic therapy has been helping people to find meaning in their lives after trauma. Theology is a process that seeks to find meaning in things that seem inexplicable, particularly eschatology.³¹ It is also a process that is contextual and autobiographical.³² A theology of healing ministry seeks to discover meaning in the healing process for both the traumatized person and those that accompany them. Because a theology of healing ministry honors the experience of trauma, it also offers the flexibility to adapt to contextual and autobiographical differences. All people strive to find meaning and

²⁹ Jones, 107.

³⁰ Jones, 107.

³¹ McGrath, 38.

³² Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 5-7; Colby Dickinson, *Theology as Autobiography: The Centrality of Confession, Relationship, and Prayer to the Life of Faith* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020), 2.

mission for their lives. A theology of healing ministry offers a mission that can help individuals redefine their lives. A traumatized person and a conversation partner can start to reframe the trauma and envision a new life with the traumatic past event. They do not deny the past event, but reframe it, so that a new life becomes possible.³³ Looking at the eschaton through the lens of healing ministry reinforces the importance of imagination, context, autobiography and meaning in eschatological inquiry, which can both provide healing from trauma and a heightened awareness of the eschaton. This same imaginative process can be equally helpful for traumatized communities and institutions who are seeking to understanding their past traumas and find meaning in them.

The resurrection is the chief experience that informs current understandings of the eschaton, and the resurrection may be the ultimate traumatic experience, not only for Jesus, but for all of his followers as well. Theologians working on eschatology look to the resurrection as the grounding analogy for the eschaton.³⁴ The uncertainty, confusion, and doubt of Jesus followers after his crucifixion are similar to those of people who have experienced trauma. Looking at the eschaton through the lens of healing ministry validates the human uncertainty about the eschaton and our ambiguous position in anticipation of the eschaton. A theology of healing ministry seeks to create a space for that uncertainty. It honors the ambiguity and journeys with those who are questioning in order to find meaning for themselves in their new lives and in the promise of the eschaton.

A theology of healing ministry enhances the mission of all Christian churches. A theology of healing ministry makes room for all of these experiences, and provides an

³³ Herman, 203.

³⁴ MacDougall, 147.

opportunity for God's grace to enter in and transform individuals, communities, institutions and creation, by inspiring eschatological imaginations. Healing ministry aims to be a restorative and a transformative process. As people recover from trauma, they do not return to their past selves. They are transformed by their trauma and by their responses to it. In the same way that trauma limits an individual imagination, the theology of healing ministry must not limit ecclesial or eschatological imaginations. A theology of healing ministry might sound like it is envisioning a realized eschaton. However, as trauma experts demonstrate, healing from trauma is rarely a fully completed task.³⁵ It requires ongoing work. Frequently, it is too hard for traumatized people to escape the past trauma. Despite the challenges, with God's grace, they may start to affect transformation in their lives, and that transformation can produce flourishing.

Pastoral theologian Miroslav Volf sees a healing power in Christ's redemption. Volf suggests that "eschatology should take on the prophetic task of explicating hope for the future ultimate redemption and reading and changing the present in the light of that hope."³⁶ A theology of healing ministry is one response to Volf's challenge. It encourages all people to embrace the "light of that hope." Similar to liberation theologians, Volf sees change as the source of hope and as an affirmation of Christ's redemption. Applying healing ministries to individuals, communities, institutions and the planet could offer an additional source of hope and further hope for redemption. Redemption is available to all individuals, communities and institutions.

The eschaton is not a place that any person, traumatized or not, can reach in this world. Nevertheless, contemplation of the eschaton can start an imaginative process that begins to transform the brokenness that exists in individuals, communities, institutions and the planet. In

³⁵ Van der Kalk, 251-258.

³⁶ Miroslav Volf, "After Moltmann: Reflections on the Future of Eschatology," in Richard Bauckham (ed.), *God Will Be All in All: The Eschatology of Jurgen Moltmann* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 257.

the eschaton, restoration is available for everyone and for every community and institution. In the eschaton, God's creation is in its rightful place. As a result, contemplation of the eschaton can be a source of healing. A theology of healing ministry seeks to highlight such healing as a means of understanding and anticipating the eschaton, and reinforces the eschaton as a source of healing.

Finally, a theology of healing ministry seeks also to do more than just prepare one for the eschaton; it also encourages one to live one's earthly life as fully as possible. Theologian Jurgen Moltmann writes, "The notion that this life is not more than a preparation for a life beyond, is a theory of a refusal to live, and a religious fraud. It is inconsistent with the living God, who is 'a lover of life.'"³⁷ Healing cannot erase any traumatic event. However, healing can provide a way for people to embrace a love of life and to honor the gift of life that God provides to us each day. As a result, a theology of healing ministry looks at healing as expansively as possible. It seeks to support healing through physical, mental, spiritual and emotional support and engagement. It seeks the flourishing of all of God's creation and all of God's creatures.

The theology of healing ministry is firmly rooted in the Christian tradition, and it can reinforce and refine our understanding of grace, sacramentality, Christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. It might be applied, not only to individuals, but also to communities, institutions and creation. Healing ministries can reframe past traumas, and provide additional support of the reframing and transformation of communities, institutions and all of creation. Therefore, a healing ministry provides a way for God's churches to more fully help the healing and transformation of God's people.

³⁷ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 50.

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